

US Centre PhD Summer Grant report

BOWLING WITH GUNS

Militias, Government, and Gun Culture in Appalachia and the Midwest United States

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“Bowling with Guns” offers an updated qualitative study of private armed citizen groups (‘militias’) in the United States under the Trump Administration. While formal state militias were consolidated into the US National Guard at the turn of the century, the current US militia movement (approx. 1994 - present) comprises political organizations such as the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, John Brown Gun Clubs, Socialist Rifle Associations, and countless other local and state-oriented armed groups nationwide. Given the well-documented prevalence of militias in nearly every state since the 1990s, one might predict more instances of notable violence. Yet, while mass shooters and antigovernment terrorists have actively taken arms in the past decades, citizen militias continue to demonstrate a relative silence of significant militant activity. If this is the case, how and why are private firearms connected to social and political activism in US militia groups? While focused on militias, this research offers insights into the wider relationship between identity, political distrust, and gun ownership in the US (cf. Jiobu/Curry 2001; Cukier/Sheptycki 2012).

I conducted my first phase of field research from April - Sept. 2019. Over six months, I contacted 10 militias, completed 16 interviews, undertook participant observations, and documented many more informal conversations in KY, OH, and WV. Data collection will continue through June 2020. To situate interpretative data, I rely on primary accounts, data sets, militia pages, and academic and grey literature. I varied my networking approaches, initially relying on personal introductions and snowball sampling, then visiting neighborhood dives, shooting ranges, and gun shows, and finally contacting militias through email and social media requests. I also interviewed individuals embedded in regional gun culture, including firearms collectors, trainers, dealers, veterans, and avid shooters. For participant observations, I attended gun shows, mingled at VFWs, shot firearms, and took classes at the largest online arms retailer in the US.

Initial field research suggests four avenues to pursue in the next phase of interviews. First, militias are often argued to be the product of a ‘white male backlash’ to social justice movements emerging from the 1960s onwards. Indeed, much evidence suggests the costs and benefits of gun ownership are correlated to gender, race, and geography. While white males comprise the largest share of firearm owners, minority males comprise a disproportionate share of firearm deaths (cf. Riddell et al. 2018; Oraka et. al 2019; Cukier/Sheptycki 2012). Gun violence is also predominantly urban: half of US gun homicides in 2015 were concentrated in just 127 cities containing less than a quarter of the national population (Aufrichtig et. al 2017). Current ‘leftist’ militias—such as John Brown Clubs, Redneck Revolts, and the Pink Pistols—that cite rectifying the historical disenfranchisement of gun rights from vulnerable populations as central missions may complicate some of these identity-based explanations of militia emergence (cf. Blocher/Miller 2018).

Second, militias are often argued to be the result of economic downturns and unemployment (cf. Dyer 1998; Vinyard 2014), yet, the average gun owner is more likely to be a middle-class income earner (cf. Oraka et. al 2019; Yamane 2016; Jiobu/Curry 2001; Blocher/Miller 2018; Willis 2018). One of my participants who works a minimum wage job is eager to join a militia, but does not own a firearm, so can only shoot when he “gets his hands” on a family pistol (Int:4831771); another participant tells me: “I use my firearms like people back in the day used to use silver and gold” (Int:3864133). These observations do not neatly align with accounts arguing militias are the result of absolute poverty rather than relative deprivation.

Third, it is not new to note that guns serve symbolic as well as practical purposes (cf. Cukier/Sheptycki 2012; Kahan/Braman 2003; Jiobu/Curry 2001). However, my research suggests the cultural relevance of guns stretches beyond machismo war culture (cf. Gibson 1994; Belew 2018), and that the political discourse of gun rights matters (cf. Berlet/Lyons 2000; Kohn 2006). Guns can be useful for rural businesses such as livestock farming, and are a social hobby with traditions that cut across partisan lines and communities. Militias are likely to reflect the social roles that guns play in everyday life for a segment of Americans.

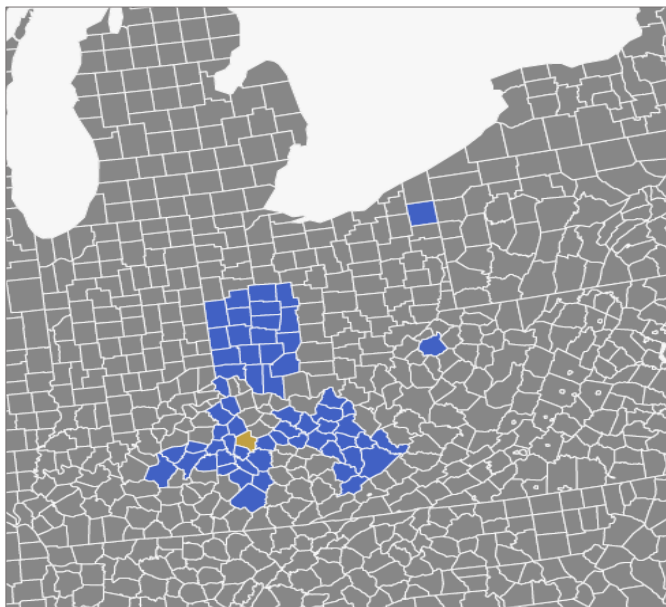
Finally, militias often cite personal protection as a motivating factor for enlistment, and research does suggest that political distrust correlates with support for gun rights (cf. Jiobu/Curry 2001). Research often frames gun ownership as a security dilemma between citizens and a ‘tyrannical’ government or ‘bad actors’ that will never disarm. Both fears reflect a belief that individual responsibility is expected to compensate for the failures of local agencies: “Think about places in eastern KY. It takes 40 min. to an hour for an ambulance to get you to a regional hospital, would someone survive a heart attack? Or a gun wound? . . . Individuals want to be able to take care of themselves because you won’t survive otherwise” (Int:3567268).

Taken together, these four understandings of militias—as groups that root from beliefs and contexts created by particular identities, economies, political ideologies, and self-defensive fears—reflect the prevailing academic explanations of militia groups since the 1990s. However, as academic interest in these groups has declined, militias have continued to expand and diversify in the new millennium. While private firearms are concentrated in the US, guns and ‘gun culture’ are global issues (cf. Cukier/Sheptycki 2012). In the US, the advent of professionalized law enforcement reduced the need for private gun use and led to increasing government regulation (cf. Blocher/Miller 2018). The transition from private firearms as a tool for local order to a symbolic right contains rich observations about the relationship between government, power, and identity. Understanding the emotive appeal of gun rights—and why militias should form around these political conceptions—can contribute to broader questions of collective action in social science, such as how individuals decide or are ‘triggered’ into political activism, and how relationships with the ‘state’ influence individual political behavior and beliefs.

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GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE OF INTERVIEWED MILITIAS
(as of September 2019)



** Yellow indicates location of fieldwork residency*